

## A Mask of Leaves

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Summary: The creation meets William Frankenstein, but instead of killing him brings him to a remote cave, where they live in harmony, the creation's face always covered. Their peace is interrupted by reverberations of the past: they must confront their origins and grapple with questions of love, loss, and innocence. Will they triumph over these obstacles, or will they be forever divided?

## A Mask of Leaves

As the monster reached the climax of his tale, my heart pounded with terror and trepidation. While he had been speaking, I had felt by turns angry, then disconsolate; his account, which through his violence often revealed him in the worst possible light, also stirred within me depths of pity. My impatience, however, had reached its peak, with the possibility for revenge so near: if I had a positive response to my suspicions, I could bring the hand of justice upon the beast. My feelings, presently, became unbearable, and I threw myself to my feet. "This is all very well," I cried. "You were shunned, rightly, by cottagers; I applaud them! "But tell me, pray, the fate of my brother William: was yours the hand that snatched him away, leaving no body, no hint of what befell him? If he truly is dead, and by your hand, both you and I will curse the day that I gave you life."

"His presence no longer brightens this accursed earth," the monster said, lowering his eyes. I threw myself upon him, prepared to avenge my poor brother's death, but the beast held me back.

"Wait, I beg you, hear me out! If you knew the suffering I have borne, in the year since the boy's family last set eyes on him, if you knew, too, the joys which I have tasted in this time, or the revelations which my story would unfold, in the knowledge of any of this you would hear me; in the absence of this I ask you to trust in my earnestness."

I resolved, if only for the sake of William, to hear the fiend's bitter tale, and wreak justice at its conclusion. Seeing that I was calmed, he resumed his story.

"I neared Geneva, dispirited and suffering; the coming of winter had violently seized the beauty of nature, my last consolation, from my despairing grasp. It happened on a lifeless evening, when I sensed my closeness to you, my elusive goal: I spied a beautiful child, a boy, as he ran, laughing, in a field alongside where I stood. My feelings on seeing him were distressing to the extreme; such an innocent might well take no heed of my appearance and come to love me, but I had formed a deep distrust of humanity and was loathe to act. My course was decided for me when the child stumbled over the uneven ground and fell, striking his head soundly upon a rock: humanity was an enemy, but this boy was guiltless, and in any case my instincts subjugated all thought of revenge. It was clear, even to my mind, ignorant of the ways of the human body, that his injury was severe; following a compunction that I did not entirely understand I approached him, cradled him gently in my arms, and directed my steps towards the wilderness of shrubs and trees on the side of a nearby mountain.

"I climbed for some hours, shielding the boy as best I could from jagged vines and branches that threatened to tear his vulnerable skin at every step. While my body battled the steep slope of the mountain and a biting fatigue my mind grappled with a no less formidable foe: the painful questions of the boy's fate and the consequences of my actions. Why had I defended him, when humanity was my sworn enemy? Would he despise me, or did hope lie in his extreme youth? You, creator, may never have suffered isolation such as I felt then, and may not understand the frenzy of fear and anticipation which came upon me as I contemplated possible deliverance from my loneliness.

"My memories of the following days are but a blur: a cave which I found and furnished to shelter the child, the howling of the wind and the wild dogs outside the cave mouth, and, most clear in my recollections, the look of peace on the boy's face as he slumbered on, no doubt dreaming of the harmony he had known before, in a time when he was well and untouched by my wretched hands.

"It was during those hours, watching over the child in repose, that I recognized the fragility of human life; the injuries he had sustained, though slight in light of what my body could endure, had placed him at the brink of the grave. The insubstantiality of human life enthralled me as much as it grieved me, and I exerted myself to the extreme to preserve him: I tenderly bound his wounds and poured water down his unfeeling throat. I guarded the cave zealously, fearing the wild dogs. Mark this, creator, mark my gentleness! As my tale grows darker and my sins draw closer around me, remember the benevolence I showed your kin then, even after the human race had spurned me! For that child was your brother, that sweet babe whose memory fills my heart with love and regret!

"During these long hours, my mind was disturbed by but one thought: the child's discovery of my deformed appearance when he awoke, and the hate that might be kindled in his heart at his first sight of my hideous visage. To avert the impending disaster—for upon my desolate heart the loss of this last hope of companionship would have brought darkness forever—I softly rose and, finding a tree nearby

the mouth of the cave, created for myself a mask woven of the freshest green leaves. No sooner had I reentered the shelter than the boy stirred, light dawning on his soft, bruised face; I rushed to his side and watched his movements intently, his apparent health causing streams of hope to well within me, a sensation I barely recognized after my unhappy experiences. His eyelids moved, showing me a sliver of blue eyes, then suddenly flew open, his eyes fixing on my covered face. He appeared overwhelmed by his surroundings, and his gaze roamed wildly around the cavern and back to me before he spoke.

" 'Where is Ernest, and dear Elizabeth? Tell me, I say, tell me!' The light left his face when he saw I made no reply. 'You do not know, then, I must be lost, far from home!' With that peculiarity of focus which I think is unique to children, he abruptly shifted his mind to me. 'Why would a grown man wear such a silly mask?'

" 'Do you ever want to hide from those around you, to be in a world with only the enchanting products of your fancy?'

"He thought for a moment. 'No one, not even my brother Ernest, understands the things I want: they are all so old, and I so young! I often want to escape to a deep forest far away, mine to rule and explore day by day, far from rules and restraints.'

" 'That is why I wear my mask: I am able to find what I desire, to seek understanding, away from human eyes and their constant judgements. We are alike, in that regard. Now sleep, little one; you are safe and free in your own forest.'

"The child appeared calmer, but his energy was near spent. As he slipped away into the land of sleep, I whispered softly: 'Rest, child, and may you be my kin, a rational creature that is like me under the skin.' Then, quieter still, in a voice only audible to myself: 'may you not flinch when you glimpse my face.'

"As the days passed, the child's health was greatly improved; my fascination with his thought processes and habits consumed much of my time, and the greater part of my fury was buried, or itself consumed into my desire to befriend this strange new creature. These hopes were complicated by his longing to be with his family—each evening as he fell asleep, and long into the night, I heard him calling their names—'Elizabeth, Ernest, Victor!' Deep though his yearning might be, I could not relate to him the manner of our meeting, as I knew the knowledge of his proximity to his home would kindle a hope of return: I rarely alluded to any time before our acquaintance, stifling any talk of his previous life, and over time his childish mind seemed to view the present as the only reality, the past a distant dream. You may reproach my acts of deception, but know this: I, companionless as I had been, believed him to be happier with me. His childlike wish to have his own refuge away from other beings had taken root in my mind, and I equated his differences from his family to mine from humankind, his innocence with that which I had lost and the little I might still possess, the home he found in nature with the claim it had as my one protector. Perhaps we did share some of these traits; perhaps in my place he would have been as I was, but in his years, few though they were, he had imbued a love of humanity, a need for their society. I had desired these things, it is true; he, in his childlike beauty, had attained them. By these, the strings of fate, we were forever divided.

"Our days soon fell into a predictable pattern, a gentle harmony between us two and our constant companion, nature's grace. We slept together in our cavern, now decorated with leaves and branches, flowers that the child had plucked on the mountainside; that place we called home. I would rise with the early morning light, leaving the boy to his peaceful slumber, and forage for food in the deep of the forest, choosing with care the items I knew he adored; I would return to find him sitting in wait, or else half awake, just leaving the kingdom of dreams. Once nourished and washed in a near mountain stream, we would set off on our day's expedition, a quest to last a mortal lifetime: to know, truly know, our surroundings, and follow nature's lead to far-flung clearings, rocky outcroppings before untrod by human feet. Walking together, singing together, carrying him upon my shoulders when his small legs were tired. We danced through glades hidden for centuries behind masks of the greenest leaves; my face, for its part, remained shielded, my fear at the discovery of my appearance weighing heavily on my heart, which at other moments felt so free.

" 'When did I come here?' The child asked one day. 'I can hardly remember. I feel that I have been here, among these woods, for many years; indeed, to me the world is a forest. This time has passed by, and with you I have wondered at the height of the mountains, the flight of the birds, but I have not known you. Who are you?'

"The child had learned much and matured in our time together, but I was unprepared for this jarring inquiry, and instead asked a question of my own. 'Do you truly love me, child?'

"He appeared taken aback. 'Love you? You have shown me nothing but gentleness, have fed me and marveled with me at the delights of nature: if you were not an object of my affection, I know not who I would care for. But I entreat you, tell me your history.'

"No reply to this painful question came to mind: how could I tell him of my origins, of the razed hopes and the flames that had consumed all I had ever held dear? Much better to hold my words, and let the truth of my face, my demonic complexion, tell all; I closed my eyes, therefore, and pulled the mask from my face. His eyes rested upon me, taking in my true appearance; a moment of silence bloomed between us, until at length he seemed to come to a decision.

" 'Like a mountain,' he murmured under his breath.

"I had expected accusations, widened eyes, prepared myself for any response, but his words startled me into speechlessness. 'What do you mean to say, child?'

" 'Rugged and wild, beautiful as a mountain, shaped by the hand of God into an enduring shape, a craggy surface to last eons, enduring far past me, past all humans. That is what you are.' He looked directly into my eyes, a contained look holding sweetness, but also a controlled sadness. A glance that itself seemed to whisper the word 'goodbye'.

"I rose early next morning, my mind too full of thoughts to remain still—the child's reaction, though hardly as horrible as I had imagined, and in its own way very promising, still perplexed me—and, unsure of where to go, walked blindly upon the mountain for some minutes. As I neared to the cave, quietly so as not to wake my

friend if still he slept, I heard something which startled me into inaction: voices, the voices of the child and a stranger. Almost unaware of my actions, I bent silently at the entrance to the cavern; I then surrendered myself to listening.

" 'My tale is wild, is it not? It is fortunate that you stumbled upon me, for I must know: have you heard anything of my family?' The boy asked. 'The Frankensteins; I am William Frankenstein. They must live very far from here, but you may knowâ€|'

" 'The Frankensteins?' A male voice replied. 'They live but a few miles hence!'

" 'This is hard to hear, I must say. Had I known their proximity through these months whose events I have related, I would have departed at my first opportunity. This time has been an adventure, and my protector is harmless, but a human boy must live among his mortal kin; though I enjoy the forest, and it brings me wisdom, it will never be my home. I am sure that once I return, most memories of this place will be replaced by the pleasures which I once experienced with my people, and will again.'

" 'Really, you should return at the soonest possible opportunity,' said the man, whom I now perceived to be a peasant. 'I could bring you now, before the beast arrives, if you are willing to brave the slope of the mountain.'

"On hearing this exchange, which was most painful to my ears, my head filled with mist, and my vision was obscured in the enormity of my hurt and disbelief; I had entered the cave and struck the peasant senseless before I was aware of my actions. Only then did I note the expression on the boy's face, the shock that reigned over his features; only then did I remember his words on my gentle disposition, and the thoughts that must be flying through his mind as he watched me harm a human being. In an instant, I had knocked the boy upon the head, with all the tenderness as was possible in such a situation: as I brought my hand down I was relieved, for I had delayed his departure, bought myself time. My satisfaction evaporated as I again noted the look on his face, though it endured but for a moment, before he fell, senseless, into my arms.

"That night I relived the past, now so distant: I watched over the child as he lay, senseless, upon the cavern floor, and grappled with dark, embattled thoughts. Now, however, my thoughts were even darker than before, and in the absence of the hope that had before sustained me, I fell still deeper into the pit of despair: I had lifted a hand against my one joy, my constant companion, had, in one moment of despicable action, proved myself unworthy of my past innocence, of any benevolent nature I might once have possessed. But who had done this to me? Who had led me to snatch a child, to love and trust in his reliance on me, only to find that he had never belonged to me, at all? Humanity! Humanity, every man, woman, and child I had ever met, had worked against me to steal every joy of which I was capable: most of all, you, my creator, had done this\_, \_you whom I now knew to be the child's kin. My anger, which the child had temporarily conquered, returned upon me then, and I cursed every one of them.

"The delights I had tasted with the child might have happened to another person in another universe, a place where I could be loved by my fellow beings. This world was much darker, and I found myself

musings over what I could do to leave my mark: not blind revenge, but justice, an eye for an eye. The boy and I could never truly love one another—the contrasts of his love and my hatred of humanity, my permanence and his transience, forbade that—but why, in the absence of our friendship, why should his family—especially you, Frankenstein—benefit, regaining a beautiful creature? He was the prize, coveted by the warring foes and deserved by neither. He the sacrifice, the innocent whose blood would be shed to right the wrongs of many. As if in a dream, I moved still closer to the slumbering child and raised my hand, ready to clutch his throat, send him away from this bleak world, perhaps to somewhere better, or simply to rest. My fingers moved closer, closer still—and stopped: my mind filled with images of that beloved child, quiet and unsuspecting. I was physically unable to perform the act: twice more during that long night I crept towards him, resolved to kill, end it all, but each time my nerve failed me. I escaped from my self-built prison as day broke, and, after hiding the still senseless peasant in the forest, rushed onto the mountainside, heading I knew not where.

"That day I spent in anguish, wandering to and fro through the wilds I had once traversed with my friend. My attempt to end that beloved life, though not carried through, had changed something deep within me: for a moment, fleeting though it was, I had imagined murdering him in cold blood. Other injuries I had caused humanity were inflicted in anger, but this death would have been premeditated, justified by the twisted logic of my tortured soul. I was no better than humans, no better than my accursed creator: truly, I was worse.

"As the sun fell below the horizon, I directed my steps towards the entrance of the cave. I felt a vague sense of something missing, if it were possible to lose more than I had already; I resolved to confess all to poor William, and therefore increased my pace, soon arriving in the dim cavern. I approached the place where the boy lay, still unconscious—I wondered at this, for the blow had not been severe—and, as I drew near, slipped in a pool of liquid. Throwing kindling in the fire that we always kept burning, I perceived that it was blood—and there, in the corner, lay William, huddled, small, and unmistakably dead. Tooth marks were clear against his skin, and, through my haze of devastation, I recognized the work of the wild dogs, roaming the mountains in search of blood. I knelt beside him one last time. 'William, my child, you did not flinch at my face, you looked much deeper than that! Perhaps you should have flinched at what is within me, gentle child, for I think you knew me better than I know myself. All I know is that you loved me, and I love you.'

"That is my tale, creator, my tale of woe. I was, in my way, your brother's murderer: mine was the hand that brought him to the mountains, that left him in danger to confront my own troubles. Given the strength, I would have killed him myself, but in any case it comes to the same thing. Yet I loved him, you know that I loved him! I committed a grievous wrong, then attempted to justify my actions: all this is unforgivable. We two are the same: you, too, hath sinned in abandoning me, for the cruelty of the world to corrupt, destroy. Humanity was right to scorn me, and now, at last, justice will be done: both of us will be scorned. Together, we shall be depart, leaving all that is innocent upon this earth in peace. Let us journey North, far from human habitation: there, we shall be humbled by nature's fury, there we shall die in penance for our joint sins."

I was captivated by the creature's tale: the exhilaration, the tenderness, the loss. At some point, my anger had melted away, changing to regret. I mourned for William, but also for the beast, and myself: we were spectacularly fallen. Nothing could undo what had occurred, and once we departed for the polar regions, the innocentâ€"Father, Elizabeth, Justine, and so many othersâ€"could live out their lives in peace. Acting on a strange whim, I reached for my equal's hand, gripping it tightly as tears for my William, and lost innocence, poured down my face. He held fast to my hand, his unmasked face glistening with tears of his own.

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